

# People's Health Practices Going Beyond Mental Illness

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# People's Health Practices Going Beyond Mental Illness

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This community publication has been the result of a three year research project titled "Health and Healing in Western Maharashtra: the role of traditional healers in mental health service delivery" funded by IDPAD/ICSSR. This project has entailed extensive fieldwork and data collection in 21 traditional healing centers spread over 9 districts of Maharashtra. The project team consisted of Bhargavi Davar, Deepra Dandekar, Madhura Lohokare, Deepak Salunke, Vikram Sapkal and Harishchandra Lagad. We want to disseminate our data and influence opinion and policy on traditional healing for mental health through this publication, our films and our research writings on the subject.

September 2006







We met shabnam while doing fieldwork in Ahmednagar at a durgah renowned for curing spirit-related problems. The healing center is situated on a hill top on the outskirts of the city. We could hear Shabnam's screams, even while we were driving upto the durgah. We saw her soon enough. She was neatly dressed, but she was tied to the railing of the steps. It was difficult for us to pass by her. She was lying flat on her side on the edge of the steps, facing us. She was shouting, asking to be freed.

she suddenly stopped shouting when she saw us. She began smiling at us in a knowing and teasing manner and began to sing in a deep and husky voice, moving her head in rhythm. She started making gestures at us and there was a look of recognition on her face. As soon as we walked by her, her stance changed to that of violent anger. She gritted her teeth and hurled abuses at us. The last we heard of her that day was a popular film song that she was singing at the top of her powerful and musical voice.

We met Shabnam many times after that while we conducted our research at the healing center. She was kept mostly tied, singing to herself, making swimming-like movements, lying face down on the floor. Each time she saw us, she giggled and tried to make overtures towards us. Each time our backs were turned, she would express the most terrible and violent anger again.

After a few days, we saw her walking around on her own, within the temple premises. She was performing all the healing rituals very slowly and this would almost take her all day. She still smiled at us, but she did not try to come close to us.

In the last week that we spent at the healing center, shabnam was practically unrecognizable. She could be seen during various activities such as cleaning the temple premises or taking offerings to the shrine. This time it was we who made overtures at her and smiled at her. She however, avoided us. When we asked a nearby shopkeeper her name, it was she who answered: 'Shabnam'

Witnessing Shabnam's healing experience was an intense experience for us.





# Objectives of the community publication:

There are many such stories of persons in the community such as Shabnam's, who go to local healing centers in order to get healed of spirit-related illness. Our presentation about her and other such stories from the community is exploratory, throwing up many issues for us to think about. We are presenting this booklet because:

- We want to appreciate the fact that a diversity of practices exists in the community, which are seen as safe places for many people suffering from emotional problems.
- We want to introduce the idea that traditional healing practices may be relevant in the context of mental health.
- We want to suggest that various rituals and traditional customs may be useful from the point of view of mental recovery to at least some people using these centers.
- We want to question whether and how traditional healing heals.
- We want to locate the meaning and experience of spirituality within the scope of personal well being.
- We want to explore the symbolic nature of spirit possession and its culturally important meanings and explanations for communities.
- We want to provide a context to our concerns within the larger legal and policy debates about the role of traditional healing centers in mental health service delivery.

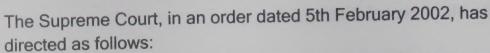
# A little bit of recent history ...

#### Writ Petition Civil No.334 of 2001

There is a traditional healing center in a remote area of Tamil Nadu called Erwadi. Around the center, private parties had set up many hutments to keep mentally ill persons. 17 such hutments were there. People from the neighboring villages dumped their mentally ill relatives here for small sums of money. The "managers" of these shelters were not mental health workers, but lay people. The center authorities claimed no responsibility for these shelters, saying that they were managed by private persons living around the center. The managers of the shelters had kept the mentally ill people chained to their cots. On August 6th 2000, 25 such people chained to their cots were burnt to death in a fire accident. A few more died of severe burns later, in the emergency wards of the local hospital.

This incident raised the question of human rights in the context of traditional healing centers and the mentally ill. After this incident, the Supreme Court initiated action on its own against the State Government of Tamil Nadu and all other states of India through a Writ Petition. The apex court asked the governments to implement the Mental Health Act, 1987. They asked all the governments to file affidavits, giving facts and information about how mentally ill people were being treated in each state. They asked about the situation existing in the mental hospitals and about the functioning of the mental health authorities. They wanted information on whether the authorities responsible for mental health were doing their job, having meetings, taking decisions, etc.

Importantly, the supreme court also wanted to know whether mentally ill people were treated badly or kept in chains anywhere in the respective states, making a direct reference to traditional healing centers. Every government has filed an affidavit in this respect.



"Both the Central and State Governments shall undertake a comprehensive awareness campaign with a special rural focus to educate people as to provisions of law relating to mental health, rights of mentally challenged persons, the fact that chaining of mentally challenged persons is illegal and that mental patients should be sent to doctors and not to religious places such as temples or dargahs".

Some state governments, such as Andhra Pradesh, have filed reports before the apex court on traditional healing centers. Doctors have visited such centers for medical investigation. In the case of the Supreme Court matters, there has been absolutely no dialogue with traditional healers. They have suggested that traditional healing centers must be registered under the Mental Health Act.

There is a need to make a collective response to these legal actions by us, the community of people using these centers. The main question seems to be, whether a traditional healing center is like a mental hospital, because the Mental Health Act covers only custodial institutions like the mental hospitals. Are traditional healing centers mental hospitals, and traditional healers, doctors?

# A modernizing view of traditional healing...

- ? There are terrible human rights violations in traditional healing centers and therefore these centers should be closed down.
- ? People who use traditional healing are superstitious. They should take their complaints to psychiatrists and to mental health professionals.
- ? Deity possession is an act of pretence and cheating.
- ? Evil spirit possession is a mental illness.
- ? Evil spirit possession is a method of gaining attention.
- ? Possession is an act of protest.
- ? Traditional healing victimizes women more.
- ? A trance is like a safety valve to express all pent up feelings of aggression.

We condemn all instances of human rights violation, wherever they happen.

# Is this modernization undemocratic?

Human rights violations happen across all institutions, whether they are mental hospitals or traditional healing centers.

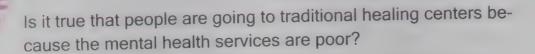
Are we going to shut down these institutions altogether or are we going to insist that they better their practices?

Are we going to throw the baby out with the bathwater?

- Mental health services within Maharashtra state are very poor with more than 10% patients going to traditional healing centers for their recovery at any given point.
- Maharashtra has a total of 4 State run mental hospitals. The total bed strength is 5695 in the 4 mental hospitals, which is one-fourth the entire bed strength of mental hospitals in India. Long stay patients (who have stayed for more than 2 years) are the greatest in number in Maharashtra.
- In the mental hospitals of Maharashtra, the NHRC found that all the wards were locked wards. Most of the wards are overcrowded. Only 10% admissions are voluntary admissions. All others are involuntary, court ordered commitments. One fourth of patients are "long stay", who have been there for five or more years. Facilities for medical emergencies are poor. The hospital does not have a casualty and emergency service. There is no short stay ward or half way home. Patients report that bathing facilities are not adequate and clothes are dehumanizing, as they are not changed as frequently as they would like. Although the quantity of food may be adequate, it is not sufficient in terms of nutritive value. Management of patients is mainly medical, with the use of drugs and modified shock treatments. Solitary confinement is still being used. Patients

complained that they were not being able to contact family members. There is hardly any psychosocial intervention. The occupational therapists have had no training in dealing with psychiatric conditions. Very few patients attend these facilities. In some hospitals, direct shock treatment, a procedure banned in the rest of the world, is still being used.

- There is a huge need of mental health professionals in Maharashtra, as in the rest of India. A population of approximately 10 crores would have a case-load of 1% with severe mental health problems and another 10%-15% with common mental health problems. There are only 6073 beds in the government sector and 652 beds in the private sector.
- There are only 481 registered psychiatrists, 75% of them being in the private sector. Only 33 clinical psychologists are available as against an ideal number of 484. So also, there is 90% deficit of psychiatric social workers.
- In 1996, a blue print for the DMHP (District Mental Health Program) was made for India, in order to implement the National Mental Health Program. In Maharashtra, there are 6 DMHP programs running. These programs have not been evaluated. The quality of services in these programs is very poor, being limited to drug dispensing at the community level. Psychosocial interventions are absent in all of the DMHPs dotting the country, and also in Maharashtra. Over half of Maharashtra is not covered by the DMHP.
- Most persons come to traditional healing centers as a last resort after many medical services are unable to help them.
- Many find the values, ambiance and approach of such local healing sites humane and satisfying their needs.



- Our proposal is that, even if mental health services are provided, communities would still prefer traditional healing.
- Conventional mental health services, such as mental hospitals, address only symptom relief and cure. They do not give answers to our life problems, which are often addressed by us through philosophical means.
- No one can decide on or define "faith" or "superstition" for others. This is a matter of personal choice and respect for religious sentiments, embodied in the constitution.
- The world of traditional healing is culturally very rich and full of personal value that appeals to the very core of a person's psyche, speeding up his/her healing process.
- Spirituality is an important component of human existence.
- Spirituality refers to our capacity to go beyond our individual boundaries and connect with a larger whole: other life forms, nature, our community, and the dynamic energies of the universe.

# Healing traditions and their diversity

There are many local traditions in Maharashtra, which play an important healing role, within the community. There is vivid diversity within these healing traditions, as can be seen from its history, its socio-cultural roots and its ritual traditions. Each local tradition is unique in terms of its history, meanings and practices. Here we are providing some examples of such traditions.

- \* Temples belonging to the 'Nath' traditions: The 'Nath' tradition holds special significance within the religious life of Maharashtra, having a special mass appeal to it, since it did away with all caste barriers. The 'Nath' saints (nine in total) were considered to be powerful and saintly men possessing magical powers of healing. There are many healing temples belonging to the 'Nath' tradition in Maharashtra, which people access in order to get 'well'.
- Temples belonging to the 'Mahanubhav' tradition: This is a Hindu sect which describes and worships five incarnations of 'Parameshwar', the eternal god. These incarnations are different from the rest of the Hindu pantheon. The 'Mahanubhav' sect doesn't recognize female deities. These incarnations are credited with great healing powers. The Mahanubhav sect is a monastic order and has very strict taboos surrounding food and behaviour. The temples belonging to this tradition are very popular for healing those who adopt the sect.
- Temples of goddesses belonging to the 'Tantric' tradition: These are goddess cults surrounding the worship of the creative-destructive powers of the mother goddess. These powers are harnessed by devotees through the personal / mystical technique of worship. These deities are considered to be ambivalent. They are considered capable of afflicting

persons who displease them with illness, misfortune and even death as also cure them once they are mollified or pleased.

- ❖ Durgahs: These are the durgahs belonging to various immortalized Sufi saints. Here, a personal / mystical form of worship is adopted, through the mediation of the saints. These sufi saints were known to perform numerous miracles for the community where they lived, helping people out of their difficulties and healing them of many stressful situations and illnesses.
- ❖ Pentecostal churches: Some churches are dedicated to the cause of healing, through the spirit of Christ. This tradition is derived from the holy bible wherein the Holy Spirit was said to have descended on the apostles after Christ's resurrection, declaring itself to be the eternal successor of Jesus Christ. The apostles would heal people of illness and evil spirit possession, calling upon the power of this Holy Spirit, whereby they miraculously began to speak in the various tongues of the local communities to whom they preached and healed. Even today, thousands throng such healing meetings, wherein the pastor calls upon the healing powers of the Holy Spirit who 'speaks in tongues' and heals.

These healing traditions have deep historical roots and myths of origins. There are many stories and songs of miracles, visions and myths. These are deeply rooted within the community notions of their own "tradition". Therefore, they do adhere to the prevailing value systems and power equations. These systems are located within the caste, class and gender hierarchies extant in society. Such healing systems may therefore reinforce caste, class or gender biases. We also observe that such places are visited more often by deprived communities: women, dalits, the poor and the homeless. Many of these places also offer shelter to mentally ill people.

# The Cult Following of Saint Balumama:

Saint Balumama was a shepherd (dhangar) by caste who lived on the border of Maharashtra and Karnataka in the last century. He was considered to be a saint by his followers as he performed many miracles that amazed them.

Today, his followers consider him to be a deity, who is an incarnation of lord Vishnu. He is considered to be a satguru, a spiritual master capable of many amazing feats. There are many fables and stories about Balumama, which demonstrate the way of perfect living for his disciples. There are many parables about him which vouch for his being a truly evolved divine entity, for the community.

Balumama is considered to be living today, embodied in his sheep. The saint's shrine is located in Admapur, near Kolhapur and is dedicated to the maintenance of his tradition and his flocks of sheep. Serving the sheep, grazing them, loving them and tending to their every need are the primary duties of each of his followers.

Those who follow Balumama's way stay with the flocks of the sheep as they move from village to village, grazing them. People who suffer from various disabilities and illnesses, may stay with the sheep in the fields, in order to be cured. They gradually report getting cured by the saint, through the care of his sheep. After they are healed, the shrine provides them with money and support in order to return home to their previous occupations, villages and families.



Women do not stay or move with the flock. They attend the evening aarti of the saint, in the various villages where the flocks stop over for the night. They circumambulate the sheep pens as though they were the shrine, and tie their wishes and offerings in the form of a cloth around the neck of the sheep.

The followers of Balumama apply the holy Bhandara (consisting of turmeric powder) on their foreheads as a mark of their faith. Bhandara is also treated as a medicine, applied to different afflicted parts of the body or even eaten.

The cult of Balumama stands for the values of non-violence and nurturing love for nature, in contrast to other religions, which lay emphasis on sacrifice and ritual. Killing or causing harm to any animal or human being is considered to be a sin in Balumama's eyes.





We visited the camp of Balumama one evening at the village of Vihapur, situated on the border of Sangli and Satara, 30 kms from the town of Karhad. The encampment consisted of about a thousand sheep and thirty or so odd shepherds who had been traveling from village to village while grazing the sheep.

The shepherds had just returned from the fields and settled the sheep in for the night in protective rope pens. Now they were all congregated under a large and colorful tent with Balumama's picture and shrine propped up on an iron cot against a corner.

All the villagers, men, women and children (a crowd of approximately two thousand people) came to the tent for the darshan of the saint that evening. They knelt before the shrine and had their foreheads smeared with Bhandara. Balumama's aarti took place amidst a festive atmosphere of drums and incense followed by many bhajans and keertans till late in the night.

Food was cooked in great vats for all those who visited and every one ate together sitting in the fields in long rows.

We could see the twinkling lights of the encampment and hear the music all the way back, as we drove to our hotel that night.

#### **Expressing Distress...**

Suresh was suffering from the aftermath of a painful divorce. He felt humiliated and hurt by his wife and her family who had accused him and fought so bitterly about the custody of their children in court.

Suresh felt extremely lonely, frustrated and helpless. Sometimes he felt that there was a well of pain and anger inside his stomach. He would roll himself up into a ball, holding his knees close to his chin. He would bang his fists on the ground and his eyes would well over with tears. At such times, Suresh would start breathing deeply; he would clench his teeth so tightly that it would hurt his jaws. He had an urge at such times to scream at the top of his voice.

Suresh knew that he could not express all this anger and pain at home. He felt his parents would think he was mad and take him to a psychiatrist or mental hospital.

- It was important for Suresh's recovery that he expressed his distress.
- He required a safe environment wherein he could express himself without being considered mentally ill.
- He felt a strong sense of belonging to the community in the healing center since everyone over there was also expressing their distress.
- He felt that he could surrender all his pain and suffering to the deity. His pain seemed to leave him when he came to the healing center.
- Suresh experienced faith after he came to the healing center.

  He felt enriched with the spiritual experiences he had over there.

#### Hope and Counseling...

### ...A healing session observed during fieldwork

#### Sufferer:

I am unable to get my daughter married. There have been various proposals coming for her but each one of them turns her down. I get more and more worried as each day passes. I feel heavy-hearted, anxious and depressed.

#### Healer in trance:

Don't worry child; don't trouble your heart. I can understand that you have been having a very difficult time since the last 4 months. I know you have been facing financial problems too. Let me tell you my son that this bad time is going to continue for another three and a half months.

This is not your fault and neither your daughter's. After three months your stars will change dramatically. You may not believe me now but then you will feel as though you have been released from a noose...that a weight has been taken off you. You will see this miracle happen. Don't worry about your daughter.

In three months, you will get a proposal for your daughter. It will happen so easily that you won't be able to believe it. There will be great celebration. Your son-in-law will be like a son to you.

- There is an important context of the sacred, something holy, in a healing center wherein a conversation with a healer might take place.
- This sacred context and the actual conversation changes the experience of distress felt by the sufferer to that of belief and hope.
- Healers often externalize the cause of sufferers' problems, to external agencies such as stars or astrology. The sufferer's experience of personal guilt or failure is altered.

#### A composite understanding of well being

The experience of mental health is much larger than the experience of a mental difficulty or a mental illness. All kinds of emotions and thoughts are a part of one's mental health. To reduce this to a small symptom inventory is to make a caricature of our well being. The ability of making relationships with others, is also a part of mental health. Mental balance and a sense of well-being is therefore an integral component of mental health.

It is also very important for one's mental health to be able to express ones inner most wishes, dreams, desires and needs, or what we often refer to as the "heart". Expressing heart matters leads to a sense of satisfaction and harmony in each individual. We obtain a sense of our "self" in such instances.

Personal distress or ill health is often a result of mismatch between the self, our thoughts, our emotions or disharmony in relationships. In our community context, our mismatch with the community also seems to matter in our experience of well being.

Lalit had to once help out his brother in delivering an important packet to someone in the neighboring village. It was already very late in the night when he left for home on his moped. On the way, his moped tyre had a puncture. He began walking after that on the long, lonely stretch of the road. Suddenly, he thought he was being followed although there was no one behind him. He grew very scared then and ran all the way home. This event had Lalit extremely scared for many days afterwards. He couldn't sleep in the night and grew startled if anyone spoke to him. Lalit's family performed a ritual in the house after that and had him especially blessed by a local healer. Lalit gradually recovered from the incident.

There is a part of our mind, which experiences fear, tension or anxiety. Sometimes, these fears may appear to be irrational, since there doesn't seem to be a logical source to it. Many of us are able to control these fears mostly, because we believe in the power or the presence of good and positive energies, and that good will conquer evil. We also attribute a mystical and above-human quality to the power of the good. This is a very human myth on which we build out lives.

This realm of the good is culturally constructed in terms of the sacred. Deities, religious rituals and prayers and faith are all ways in which persons connect to this realm of positivity and the good. Traditional knowledge systems in India address well being in terms of the "chakras". This signifies our connection with the universe. It is characteristic of us as human beings to experience well being in relation to our notion of the sacred, or good and evil. This is common to all human cultures, except that the experience and the expression of this may be different.

Geeta was a very spiritual person. She prayed daily, performing some small rituals such as lighting a lamp, offering flowers and burning incense sticks. She would also chant a shloka in reverence to the deity.

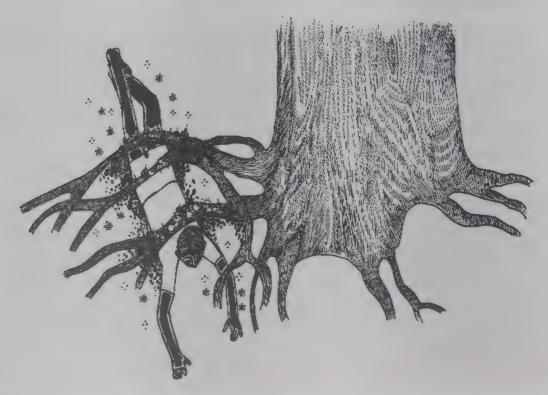
It wasn't anything great but she just felt that the day was not a normal or a usual one when she couldn't perform her morning rituals. She felt as if she had missed something important, that the day was incomplete. She also felt a little uncomfortable and anxious on such days, when she felt a unprotected and vulnerable, as if something bad could happen to her on that day.

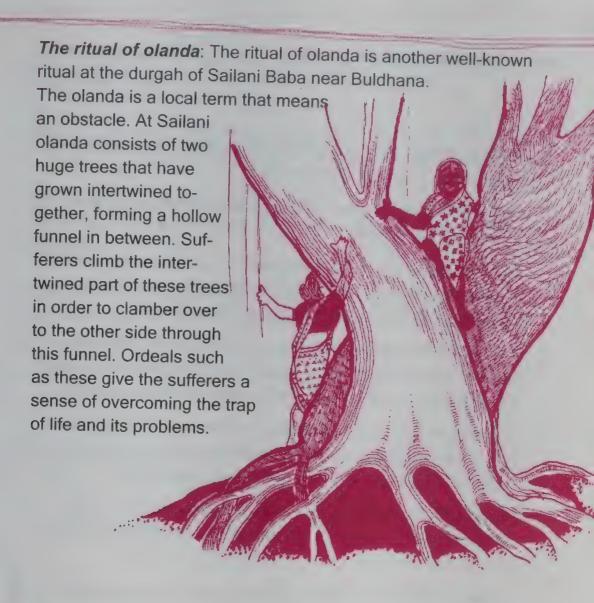
The connection with the sacred and its introduction in a person's life, through the mode of local healing traditions is an important way of installing in him/her a sense of being complete, safe, secure and well. This realm allows a person to enjoy positive emotions and thoughts, and a sense of connection with others, nature and the universe.

#### Rituals in every day life

Modernity has diminished the role of rituals in everyday life. To ritualize our lives is an important way of coping with stressful situations. This is common to all human cultures. Rituals maybe dispel a sense of negativity, fear, doom, insecurity, tension, anxiety or grief. Performing small ritual actions may help to restore a sense of safety and security within individuals. Healing rituals serve to reestablish a sense of harmony in persons who may feel imbalance in the boundaries between what they consider to be good or evil. We describe here some of the everyday rituals we have encountered in Maharashtra.

The ritual of passing under the vaaghjaali: The ritual of passing under the vaaghjaali is a popular healing ritual at a renowned healing center, the durgah of Sailani Baba in district Buldhana. The word jaali means a mesh. Here, at the durgah, the jaali has been formed by tree roots, forming a small tunnel like structure over the ground. Sufferers believe that passing through this tight tunnel will relieve them of evil influences and protect them.





Chaining the sufferer is a prominent ritual, which has to be examined in a case-by-case manner before labeling it as human rights violation.

This chaining (bedi) is a ritual wherein the evil influence over the sufferer is symbolically brought under the control of the healing deity by means of using non-restrictive and often voluntary chains.

#### Mental health benefits of rituals:

- Rituals produce a feeling of a magical safety layer, while one goes about everyday mundane life.
- Performing rituals serve to help us deal with negative energies, thoughts or fears.
- Rituals help us to mentally establish an environment of positivity. We experience new emotions such as celebration, devotion, joy, bliss, and a deep sense of connection etc.
- Rituals are non-verbal also, involving the use of our multiple senses (e.g. incense). Such rituals may alter the inner experience of trauma at the most primitive level of consciousness.
- Some types of ritual performance connect individuals powerfully to their own body movements and actions, bringing about more bodily awareness (e.g. drumming or dancing).
- Ritual performance connects individuals powerfully to their minds enabling them to focus, concentrate and heighten their mental abilities.
- Ritual performance gives a sufferer a sense of participation in his/her own recovery and well-being.
- Performing a ritual is often a collective experience. The community may identify a ritual with various symbols of personal recovery: cleansing, overcoming and the restoration of health.
- Performing a ritual may lead a person to the experience of belief in oneself, in others and in the overall design of human existence.

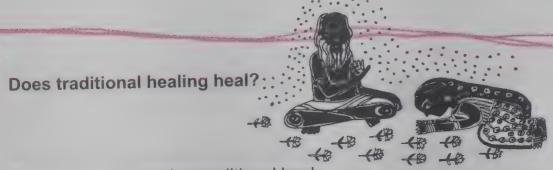
So compare these two commonly found situations from a human rights perspective:

Shweta lives in a private institution and refuses to take her psychiatric medication. She is kept naked in a solitary cell.

Urmila wears a chain around her wrist to trap the evil influence within her, in a traditional healing center. She has complete freedom to move around.

Shankar had been kept tied to a tree in the local healing center for three days. Both his hands and legs were tied so that he could barely move.





Research suggests that traditional healing may have beneficial psychological effects on the sufferers.

Prominent psychologists have compared the effects of healing rituals with psychotherapy and have suggested that both methods of treatment have certain similarities.

Gouri had just lost her son. She would sit in a shrine nearby to her home for hours accompanied by her husband. It was only after being asked by the Guru-ji there, that Gouri had her first emotional outburst. It was the first time that she confessed to feeling that she had been an inadequate mother. Gouri's husband helped her come to terms with her loss. He reminded her of all those instances when their son had been so happy...

Expressing problems that are deep seated and suppressed has the positive psychological effect of a catharsis. Although catharsis may be painful, it helps a person to face his/her problems and find solutions for them.

Gouri felt troubled by the image of her dead son. Guru-ji gave her a calendar picture of the cherubic baal-Gopaal tended to lovingly by his smiling and benevolent mother Yashoda-maai. He told her to look at this picture or remember it every time she remembered her dead son.

Traditional healing involves replacing negative emotions with positive thoughts and emotions through mythical and culturally familiar images. Traditional healing uses very powerful positive imagery, to which sufferers attach meanings of love and hope.

A healer has a powerful influence over the mind of the sufferer. He becomes a figure of authority, to the sufferer due to his sacred and religious convictions.

We have in the course of our fieldwork, seen a healer work "miracles" on an alcoholic by simply pronouncing him to be healed. The sufferer indeed adopts this powerful auto-suggestion made by the healer and actually gives up alcohol.

Many a times, a healer becomes a father figure or a wise man and spiritual guide to the community of sufferers who come to the healing center.

"It is only Bappa's presence in my life that has shown me the True Path. All my problems were solved by him. I became enriched with an energy that goes beyond science. It is a miracle. I got the Direction, pulled by the gravity of that power", the devotee of a healer in Ahmednagar told us.

Going to a healer with psychological distress is not the same thing as going to a mental health clinic or institution. A sufferer may well accept going to a healer for resolving a troublesome problem. But, he rejects the idea of being labeled mentally ill, taking medication or shock treatment for it.

Medicine connects mental distress to mental illness. Many people who feel distressed may not feel ill at all. They want solutions to their life problems and not labels that might stigmatize them and their families unnecessarily. People with psychological distress see this distress as a manifestation of evil and deal with it by seeking help from traditional healers.

Research suggests traditional healing to have positive biological effects, since it affects the entire body of a sufferer. It targets all the senses of an individual providing for him/her a total experience of wellness. The smell of incense, the visual pleasure of seeing auspicious items such as flowers and lamps, visually connecting with the human face of a deity or a healer, the sound of musical instruments, celebration, trancing and going into other consciousness states- all go in to infusing a sufferer with a sense of positivity, so required for healing.

#### Rajani...

Rajani is well known as a medium of the great goddess Kaalubai in her village. We saw her on numerous occasions during our fieldwork at the temple of Kaalubai, also known locally as Mandhardevi near Wai (District Satara). The following is a fictionalized version of her trance experience.

She gradually began to dissolve herself in the worship of the mother, her eyes shut tightly. She imagined the mother's face as she began to sway on her feet letting herself go. For a brief moment she re-experienced the chilly interior of the temple, the floor below her feet, the sweet smell of incense and the beating of the drums. She let all these sensations play in her being for one last time as if she were an empty vessel.

She began to go deeper in her mind searching for the mother. She began to breathe fast and her heart began to pound. One part of her suddenly grew afraid of the mother's power. The other half kept running towards the mental image of the Mother, the Mother whose eyes were like the blooming lotuses and whose tongue dripped blood.

Rajani fell to her knees and began to sing praises to the Mother in a high-pitched, guttural voice. She sweated, murmured and trembled, swaying from side to side, her hair whipping around her face like a million snakes.

Rajani danced and danced, unmindful of all. People around her began to smear vermillion on her fore-

head...they began to ask her for solutions to their problems...

We spoke to Rajani at length at various occasions about her present vocation as a medium and the reasons for it.

Rajani was candid in her opinion about people. According to her there were four types of human beings: those who believed, those who didn't believe, those who didn't know and those who feared...

We wondered which category we fitted into... it seemed like we were a part of all four categories!

Rajani provided us with a lot of information on the phenomenon of spirit possession and deity possession. We present her viewpoint here as a part of her community's explanatory framework describing notions of health and illness, balance and imbalance.

According to Rajani, the universe was divided into three realms: the *iha-lok* (the world of humans), the *para-lok* (heavens full of celestial beings) and the *yama-*lok (netherworld of hell, full of suffering). The *iha-lok* was the battleground where one had to prove one's worth in every birth. Each being's destiny was then decided by his/her *karma*.

However, all people who died untimely deaths in the *iha-lok* could neither go to *para-lok* or yama-lok without completing their destined tenure here. They then hovered around in the *iha-lok* as spirits. They inhabited areas outside the boundaries of villages and towns, near waterholes, on old trees, near about places where their bodies had died and at cremation and burial grounds.

These spirits popularly belonged to accident victims or women who died during childbirth. These spirits yearned to fulfill and enjoy their worldly tenure. For doing this, they possessed human beings who wandered about in lonely areas inhabited by spirits or those who were in a condition of impurity and vulnerability (such as during menstruation).

Typical symptoms of spirit possession included fearful visions and dreams, emotional upheavals, strange behaviour, continuous hiccupping or yawning, babbling and running away, physical illness, family maladjustment, financial losses and the ability to perform physical deeds beyond one's strength.

But all according to Rajani was not lost even if spirit possession were to happen. None of these symptoms were permanent. This condition could be rectified through traditional healing, according to her. The process was long winded but sure to succeed...

According to Rajani, the diagnosis is always arrived at in the healing center. There is a procedure for this which must be followed at every step. She has seen that this diagnosis happens by way of a trance. A diagnostic trance is the first presentation of the evil spirit in front of the deity. (This presentation trance is also tellingly termed as 'hajiri'). The deity summons the spirit in regular séance and trance sessions. At such times, she says, the sufferer's self becomes passive and the possessing spirit manifests and converses with the deity. A duel between deity and spirit ensues.

Through threat, request and the fulfillment of the spirit's unquenched desires, the deity, during an entire ritual period, gradually cajoles, forces and threatens the evil spirit into leaving the body of the sufferer. Rajani has seen this many times with her own eyes. These trance sessions finally exorcise the evil spirit from the sufferer, curing him/her of the deep seated reasons for his/her illness. She adds that a powerful healer may effect the same exorcism on a sufferer by using sacred objects such as holy water and oils as props. According to her, medicines do not help in such cases.

The sufferer keeps himself/herself 'pure' through this entire exorcism period, often performing religious rituals through the day, performing arduous penances, doing 'seva' in the healing temple, observing physical hygiene and food and sex related taboos.

A trance involves violent physical activity. Persons in trance are seen conversing with the deity amidst the swaying of bodies, the flaying of arms, amidst summersaults and rolling on the ground and the wild swinging of hair.

The experience of the divine may not just stop at the experience of diagnosis and healing. Rajani related how it happened with her...

Sometimes, the healing deity gets extremely impressed with the faith, purity and seva demonstrated by a sufferer.

The deity then blesses the devotee by continuing to habituate his/her body, as a means of communicating with other sufferers. The sufferer then becomes a medium or a mouthpiece of the deity. He / she becomes a healer.

# Our studies and field experiences suggest that:

- Trance is a culturally defined, physical manifestation of a spiritual healing experience.
- A trance usually has personal meanings for the person who is experiencing it.
- Deity possession and evil spirit possession are experientially different.
- The possession by an evil spirit symbolizes an uncomfortable physical, mental or social condition and the possibility of its cure by seeking help from a local healing center.
- The trance of a deity symbolizes the process of feeling sacred oneself, or becoming an extension of a sacred entity, with special magical curative powers. It is a state of positive mental health.
- The movement from evil spirit possession to deity possession / mediumship is a movement of healing and recovery, a personal journey.
- A trance is an altered state of consciousness, like sleep. It is a normal experience, also experienced by many in modern-day trance meditation groups.
- A trance is known to activate various bio-chemicals in the body, having a deep, relaxing and healing effect on an individual's mind and body.
- A trance infuses a sense of power in an individual who is able to stretch his/her scope of bodily movements and levels of consciousness to its very limits. This is a culturally available coping mechanism.

This space is especially important for women who are socially taught to be demure and controlled in what they think and how they behave.

We are not denying the fact that a very small percentage of people who are possessed, trance, or have other different perceptual experiences, may be suffering from a severe mental health problem. But we are questioning whether such experience deserves the label of "mental illness".

## But this could be happening next door!

We met Leena during the course of our fieldwork in Sangli. She belonged to an educated family and was studying in her second year of MBBS. She told us a very startling story.

Leena had felt constantly followed by an old woman and a young boy. She saw them standing and looking at her wherever she went: in her classroom, outside the window, in the playground, in the canteen, in the bus, reflected in the mirror in her bedroom whenever she looked up, in cinema houses, malls, restaurants... everywhere she went. They were always smiling at her menacingly and looking at her with blank gazes. She was sure that they were dead because of the kind of pallor on their faces and just the look about them...she had seen many dead bodies as a part of her studies.

Leena grew terrified by them and they haunted her constantly. She felt afraid all the time. She did try to confide in her parents about the situation but they tried to convince her that she was mistaken or tired or simply imagining it. Leena's parents were preoccupied with a property-related court case at the time.

The possibility of mental illness was the first to strike Leena since she was a medical student herself but Leena was quite convinced that there was nothing wrong with her either mentally or physically. On the contrary, she was absolutely sure that this was a spirit-related problem. She herself found all this very perplexing and difficult to believe. She also felt a little embarrassed about the way she thought.

Soon after that, Leena had a small accident while driving. It was late in the evening as she saw the same duo at the road side as if wanting to cross. Instead of crossing across the road however, they both began walking towards Leena's bike in the middle of the road. Leena swerved violently and crashed into the footpath. For her friend riding pillion with her, Leena just seemed to loose control

over the vehicle all of a sudden, in the middle of an empty street!

Leena believed that she had had enough and admitted herself into psychiatric care in the very same medical college where she was studying.

How can a mental health professional help in situations such as Leena's, who believes firmly that she is spirit possessed?

Accept whatever the sufferer is saying as his/ her valid and true experience. Validate the reality of that experience.

Exercise caution in viewing all perceptions of vision as "hallucination", deserving a psychiatric diagnosis.

Leena felt a huge surge of relief being able to confide in the psychiatric social worker and counsellor Asha-tai, at the clinic. Asha-tai listened carefully to the story, asking Leena many questions about her life in general. Above all, Leena felt as though she were believed.

Recognize that the sufferer has had good reason to feel scared or upset about her experiences and requires to talk about her present crisis.

Examine the nature of the perceptions and how she relates to them.

Exercise caution in seeing her personality as disorganized simply because she has different perceptions.

Asha-tai asked Leena about how she could make her feel more secure and safe within the hospital. Leena was anxious about being

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accosted by the two spirits again. She felt relieved when Asha-tai posted a nurse in her room for 24 hours.

Let her construct for herself those specific situations which have led to the current crisis. What are the most troubling aspects for her about her perceptions?

Asha-tai was able to communicate the nature of Leena's distress to her parents. She was able to explain to them that Leena was feeling alone and required their support in order to recover.

The physical health of the sufferer is important. In doing case work, also check for any physical health complaints, infections or nutritional problems. Deficiency of certain essential nutrients can result in perceptual abnormalities.

Asha-tai had a doctor check her out. Leena also ate well and was able to sleep well over the next few days. This alone would speed up her recovery, Asha-tai thought.

# Explore what the sufferer thinks about seeking mental health care.

Leena was sure that there was nothing mentally wrong with her. She refused to be treated for mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. However, she wasn't averse to being mildly tranquilized, since she had been very tired, tense and anxious over the past few weeks.

Leena was very intent on meeting a traditional healer. She felt sure that the problem she was experiencing had no other solution other than what traditional rituals had to offer. She felt that her experiences were a point of spiritual growth for her, and that some powers were trying to give her some messages. She wanted to talk to someone who was well versed in such matters as spirits and deities.

Always safeguard the full consent of the sufferer for whichever treatment s/he desires.

Asha-tai assured Leena that she would get in touch with the healer that Leena knew and let her go and seek ritual remedies. She would work with the hospital authorities to seek her release.

However she was frank with Leena about not being able to recommend traditional remedies immediately before having researched them herself.

Be aware of the particular traditional healer and the healing tradition that s/he adheres to.

Asha-tai prepared a file on the traditional healer Leena wanted to visit. Her research consisted of not only talking to the healer and understanding his practice but also talking to various others who came to the healer.

Asha-tai also had conferences with the healer, the hospital authorities, Leena's parents and the local doctor before bringing Leena to the healer. She persuaded Leena's case with the others.

Always make a sufferer aware of the different implications of each type of healing. Provide the sufferer with as much information as possible.

Do not withhold support because you do not personally believe in what the sufferers believe.

Asha-tai had long discussions with Leena and the option of taking recourse to traditional healing. She gave Leena the file that she had compiled and made Leena go through it before deciding anything.

Safeguard against human rights violations in the local healing center. Be in touch with the sufferer, his/her carers and the healer on a regular basis.

Continuously explore with the sufferer the meanings that rituals and other healing experiences at the healing center have for her.

It was at this healing center that we encountered Leena. Situations had improved greatly for Leena although she had not been able to take her second year MBBS exam. She was planning to repeat her year.

It was however Leena's father who completed her story for us...

...Leena's family had won the ancestral property case in their native village against a family of caretakers who had lived there for generations and were now laying claims to it.

The present caretaker's widowed aunt and nephew had committed suicide there once the eviction orders from the court had arrived. Maddened with grief and frustration, the caretaker had vowed outside the court that he would never let Leena's family rest in peace and that the property, for which their family had hankered so long, would fall to dilapidation without an heir...



# So now, consider the following case:

Juhi had to go for an appendix operation...

She knew that the doctors would cut open her abdomen with a scalpel. They would cut the appendix away from her intestine, the appendix, which was an unimportant but a necessary part of her body. They would stitch her intestine and dispose off the removed appendix, which was now infected. After that, they would stitch the cut on her abdomen.

She knew that the operation would probably involve some bleeding and that the wound would hurt for some days at least. After a few days, she would have to return to the nursing home to get her stitches removed. That too would hurt. She knew she would have to take heavy antibiotic medication to avoid infection in the wound.

What made her go through the operation, being aware of all this, was the knowledge that the wound would heal gradually and the terrible pain in her stomach would disappear since the reason for it would have been operated upon and removed.

Would we consider Juhi's operation to be a human rights violation because it meant hurting and cutting open her body?

Similarly, when full and informed consent is there,

Could an exorcism ritual, which thousands of communities choose on a daily basis, be also considered a valid choice in therapy?



# We want to know what you feel...

We have discussed our study and our perspective with you in detail. We have also shared with you our fieldwork experiences. We have told you fictionalized versions of people's actual life stories.

- We want to know whether you perceive traditional healing places to be safe spaces for people suffering from emotional difficulties?
- We want to ask you whether traditional healing practices and their symbolic nature have any relevance for mental health and recovery?
- Do you think there is an inter-relationship between spirituality and well-being?
- Do you think that we can place the cause of traditional healing in our larger legal and policy debates about the role of traditional healing centers in mental health service delivery?
- Can we arrive at a definition of what human rights violations constitute both within the mental health sector as well as within the area of traditional healing?
- Do you think consent for any health-related treatment is important? How would you compare involuntary treatment in a mental hospital with voluntary treatment in a traditional healing center?
- Do you think traditional healing practices involve superstition?

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Bapu Trust creates pilots and monitors programs that enable self reliance among persons with psycho-social and psychiatric disabilities. Such programs aim to connect with peoples' aspirations and potential and promote their positive mental health.

We work towards enhancing and promoting the emotional well being of persons in vulnerable positions (women, the homeless) and other communities in need. We create innovative preventive programs in the community so that the burden of psychological ill health in the community is reduced. We try to change the structural, social, legal and policy environment so they remain just and fair to people with psychosocial disabilities

We work with people with psycho-social and psychiatric disabilities so they can get good quality mental health care and can live in an unbiased society, with knowledge, understanding dignity, self-determination and self respect. We fight unfair, forced or abusive mental health interventions.

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